FRANCESCO PETRARCA
1304-1374

An Exhibition of his Work and Influence

Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library
University of Toronto
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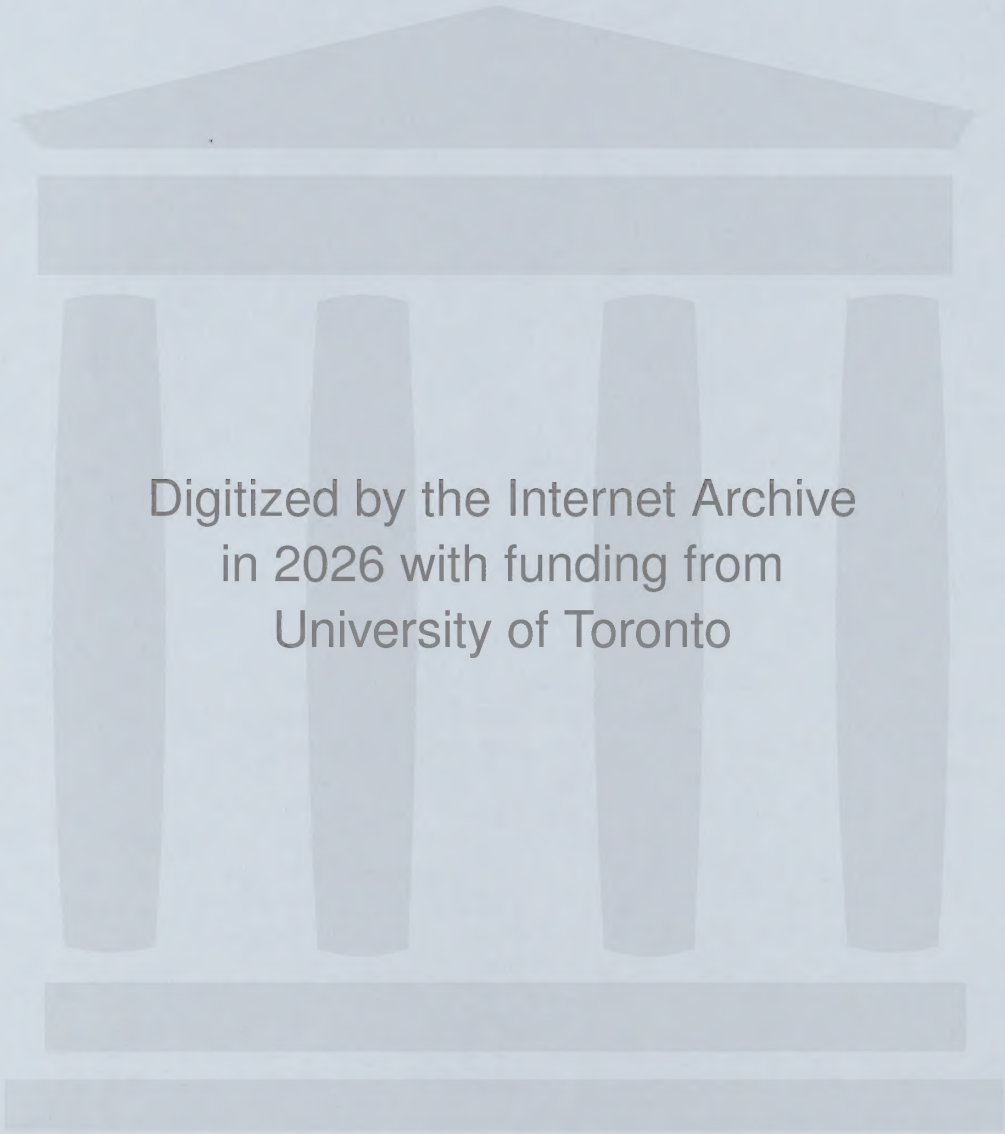
Francesco Petrarca was born in Arezzo in 1304, the son of a Florentine exile, but passed much of his early life in Avignon, then the seat of the Papacy. His country home at Vaucluse is described in both his correspondence and his poetry. In 1341 he was invited to Rome to be crowned as supreme poet on the Capitoline Hill. He spent some years in Venice and Milan, and in 1354 was summoned to Mantua to meet the Emperor Charles IV. In 1356 he was sent by Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, as an ambassador to Paris. He died in his villa at Arquà, near Padua, in 1374.

His fame was early established with his Latin works. He revived epistolography with Cicero as his model, and thanks to his letters and the autobiographical element in many of his works more is known about him than about any other figure of his age. His friendship with Giovanni Boccaccio was fruitful, bringing Greek studies to Italy and engendering enthusiasm for critical editions of classical authors. His collection of manuscripts, many richly illuminated, was famous. His De viris illustribus was a storehouse for later writers and a model for biographers. Influential in a different way were the Trionfi (Triumphs), which gave artists a series of new themes for wedding-chests, tapestries, frescoes and pageants. But to later generations he is best known as the poet of Laura, the lady whom he met in Avignon on Good Friday 1327, and who in his poems is half-real, half-symbol. The poetry written both before and after her death in 1348 was imitated all over Europe, for style as well as for sentiment. He gave the sonnet form to France, Spain and England, and Petrarchism became the dominant mode for sixteenth century lyric poetry.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The Classical Scholar-(Cases 1-2)

Petrarch's life and opinions are well known to us through his letters and his poetry. During his lifetime Petrarch made several collections of letters, among them the autobiographical Epistolae familiares, modelled after Cicero in Latin prose. On exhibit is one of the earliest printed editions dating from 1492. From his own day to the present he has been the subject of biography and criticism. The title page of Tomasini's Petrarcha redivivvs, a collection of early biographies of the poet published in 1635, shows his beloved Laura standing beneath a laurel tree, her personal symbol and the symbol of poetic achievement since classical times.

Petrarch's own copy of Virgil with his marginal notes, shown here in a facsimile reproduction, indicates both the magnificence of his library and his devotion to his classical masters. In the Virgilian manner he wrote a group of eclogues called Bucolicum carmen, published in 1504 with those of Virgil and other Latin poets, and an epic poem called Africa with Scipio, the victor of the Punic Wars against Carthage, as its hero.

The Trionfi (Cases 2-3)

Like Petrarch's Latin works, his Trionfi look backward in their inspiration, this time to the mediaeval ecclesiastical procession with its allegorical figures. In each of the six triumphs, Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time, and Eternity, the central figure leads as his captives characters from literature and history who have been conquered by him, and each triumph in turn is more powerful than the last.

The Trionfi have been published in a great variety of editions with many different illustrations. Those on exhibit include a facsimile of a fifteenth century manuscript with gold and purple decorations, a pocket-size edition from 1610, and a fine modern edition in English translation.

The Canzoniere (Case 4)

Petrarch's enduring fame and influence rest on his Canzoniere or Rime, which he himself called Rerum vulgarium fragmenta (fragments of common things). They are a collection of 366 short lyric poems,

mostly in the sonnet form, which he continued to revise and add to until the end of his life. The Vatican manuscript 3195, shown here in a facsimile edition, was Petrarch's final version in his own hand, on which he was working on the day before he died. 266 of the poems are dedicated to "Laura in life", the remaining 100 to "Laura in death". Through his love for Laura, real and ideal, Petrarch expresses his vision of life and the world around him. Particularly characteristic is a mood of melancholy which comes with the passing of time.

The Canzoniere have been the most widely published of all Petrarch's works. From the fifteenth century on they have frequently appeared with commentary by various writers, on occasion so lengthy that it seems to overpower the poems themselves. Among the best known of the commentators are the fifteenth century arbiter of taste, Cardinal Bembo, and the great nineteenth century poet Giacomo Leopardi.

Petrarch's influence in Italy and Spain (Cases 5-6)

Lyric poetry in sixteenth century Italy was dominated by the influence of Petrarch. His commentator Bembo himself wrote sonnets which appear in many sixteenth century anthologies. Torquato Tasso drew constantly on Petrarch, interweaving lines and phrases from the master into his own work. Bernardino Rota wrote a sonnet sequence on the death of his wife in imitation of "Laura in death". Stefano Colonna's collection of poems are entitled I Sonetti, le Canzoni, e i Triomphi di M. Lavra in risposta di M. Francesco Petrarcha ... In Girolamo Malipiero's Petrarca spiritvale (1545), Petrarch's sonnets are adapted to express the believer's love for Christ. Petrarch's followers also included a number of distinguished women poets; particularly admired in their own day were Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Gàmbara.

The adulation of his followers also produced a reaction in others, not so much against Petrarch himself as against slavish, unimaginative imitations of his work. Niccolò Franco satirized them in Il Petrarchista (1541). Lodovico Ariosto also ridiculed the excesses of Petrarchism in Orlando furioso.

Sixteenth century Spain saw a number of different translations of the Canzoniere. On exhibit are versions by Salomon Usque and Henrique Garcez. The sonnet became established as a literary form in Spanish literature with the work of Juan Boscán Almogaver and Garcilaso de la Vega. Boscán's early poems had been written in Castilian metres, until he met the Venetian ambassador to Madrid who

persuaded him to imitate Italian models. At his death in 1540 he was editing for publication his own poems and those of his friend Garcilaso de la Vega. They were published in 1543 by Boscán's widow, and had a wide influence on Spanish lyric poetry.

Petrarchism in France and England (Cases 7-8)

Petrarch and his imitators also greatly influenced the development of French literature. The French poets of the Renaissance used the Greek and Roman writers and Petrarch as their models. Clément Marot translated and adapted the poetry of Petrarch; among his works is the influential Visions de Pétrarch. Maurice Scève, of the poetic school at Lyon, was involved in the discovery of the supposed tomb of Laura in 1533 at Avignon. Joaquim Du Bellay's publication in 1549 of his Olive, a collection of love sonnets, was responsible for popularizing the Petrarchan fashion in France. Pierre de Ronsard, France's greatest poet of the sixteenth century, was most successful in adapting the ancient and Italian literary traditions into original poems. His preferred form was the sonnet. Philippe Desportes, who published his Derniers amours in 1583, wrote much in the tradition of the Petrarchists.

The earliest reference to Petrarch in English literature is in the work of Chaucer, who visited Italy in 1373 and may possibly have met the Italian poet. In his interest in Italian literature Chaucer had no immediate followers, and it was not until the sixteenth century that the Petrarchan influence began to be felt in England with the sonnets of Wyatt and Surrey. It reached its height late in the century with the writing of literally hundreds of sonnets. Among the best known collections is Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence Astrophel and Stella, which shows a complete mastery of the Petrarchan form. England's Virgin Queen, Elizabeth, became in the poetry of her subjects, an ideal figure to be compared to Laura for beauty and chastity. Sir Walter Raleigh makes this comparison in his introductory poem to Spenser's Faerie Queen. The excesses of Petrarchism also produced a reaction in England, best illustrated in Shakespeare's well known sonnet "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun", addressed to a lady deliberately dark (in contrast to the fair Laura) and deliberately human.

That Petrarch can continue to inspire modern writers is demonstrated by the prose versions of "Laura in Death" by the great Anglo-Irish writer John Millington Synge recently republished by the Dolmen Press in Dublin.